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TOURING SANTA FE WATERSHED, DOMENICI PLEDGES TO KEEP WORKING ON FOREST HEALTH INITIATIVE

Senator Says Overgrown Forests Pose Danger Throughout N.M., Nation

SANTA FE -- In touring a dangerously overgrown forested watershed above Santa Fe, U.S. Senator Pete Domenici today pledged to continue his bipartisan effort to expand the ability of federal agencies to help communities protect themselves from the fire dangers.

Domenici toured the watershed area today with Santa Fe Mayor Larry Delgado and U.S. Forest Service personnel to see first-hand the fire and environmental danger posed by the inability of federal agencies to thin overgrown areas.

New Mexico's senior Senator said it is important that Congress continue to fight for legislation to break through the logjam of needed forest management activities in areas where federal lands interface with communities such as Santa Fe, Las Vegas, Cloudcroft and Silver City. A Domenici-promoted healthy forest initiative hit a wall last week after the Clinton administration threatened to veto an emergency supplemental appropriations package if it included the fuels reduction program.

"Everyone knows the danger Santa Fe now lives under, and we understand how regulations, lawsuits and the power of radical environmental special interests have hamstrung efforts to correct the problem and protect lives," Domenici said. "We must act now to begin fixing the problem so forest communities aren't solely relying on a hope and a prayer that an act of God or human carelessness doesn't burn them out."

Domenici said he is actively looking for other legislative vehicles on which to attach the national healthy forest program, which has been crafted to expand federal activities to clear forests of excess fuel in areas where federal lands interface with communities. The effort would authorize the U.S. Forest Service and the Department of Interior to remove hazardous material to alleviate immediate emergency threats to so-called "urban wildland interface areas" or those areas where communities abut forests.

The proposal, as crafted by Domenici and Senator Jeff Bingaman, **would not** have overridden current environmental, labor, or civil rights laws. Despite that fact, White House officials found the plan objectionable even after helping draft the proposal.

"The need for this work throughout the West is so profound that it would be negligent on the part of our national leaders to put politics before public safety and, ultimately, what is best for our cherished public lands," Domenici said. "This is not simply a matter of funding, but a need to embrace moderate new policies that promote a steady, healthy cleanup of our long-neglected forests. This is particularly important where people's lives and homes are at stake."

Domenici said the healthy forest initiative would allow the Forest Service and Interior Department to use grants and cooperative agreements to conduct forest cleanup while providing jobs to local people, opportunities to private, non-profit, or cooperating entities, such as youth conservation corps, and opportunities for small and micro businesses.

The plan would also entail identifying communities where hazard reduction activities are needed, underway or pending. It also sought to identify roadblocks to beginning hazardous fuel reduction work in communities at risk.